

State Department Training: Investing in the Workforce to Address 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
Challenges  
Testimony

Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs  
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce  
and the District of Columbia

By  
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Chairman Akaka, Senator Johnson, as demonstrations sweep across the Arab world we have seen exemplary performance by Foreign Service Officers taking risks to protect American citizens and report on developments. Yet despite the work of a number of superbly qualified Arabic speaking officers our government lacks sufficient trained Arabic-language speaking officers to fully understand and assess what is happening -- to go beyond the glib, English-speaking reporters in Tahrir Square to take the full measure of what Islamists, young people, the demonstrators and the jobless are saying off camera. We lack these capacities because for years the Department of State has lacked the resources to train enough officers in language skills. The Director General, Ambassador Powell and Foreign Service Institute Director, Dr. Whiteside are making progress in addressing the problem, but it will be years before they can compensate for the mistakes of the past.

This is a microcosm of the training problem that you on this committee and your colleagues are going to make worse or better in the budgets of this and the next few years. We hope you will improve a situation that former National Security Advisor General Brent Scowcroft as urgently needing attention.

The American Academy of Diplomacy, an expert, non-partisan organization of retired senior diplomats, has just released a study of training and education

necessary for our diplomats to meet these new challenges, *Forging a 21<sup>st</sup> –Century Diplomatic Service for the United States through Professional Education and Training*. The study found serious problems and makes specific recommendations. It builds on our earlier study of overall staffing, *A Foreign Affairs Budget for the Future* (FAB). Like that study, this one was generously supported by the Una Chapman Cox Foundation along with support from the American Foreign Service Association, the Delavan Foundation, and our own resources. Ambassador Robert M. Beecroft chaired the project and the Academy’s Chairman, former Undersecretary Thomas Pickering, headed the distinguished advisory panel. I have to pay a special thanks to State’s Director General, Ambassador Nancy Powell, and the director of the Foreign Service Institute, Dr. Ruth Whiteside. Without their cooperation and provision of information and the extensive work of their deputies and staff our work could not have been done. However, the conclusions are our own for which we alone are responsible.

Since you have before you the recent GAO report on training I should note that the GAO recommendations and ours are different but mutually reinforcing. The GAO report focuses particularly on evaluating training, measuring outputs rather than inputs, the need for better Career Development Officer (CDO) support to officers and deficiencies in the Individual Development Planning (IDP) process. The last two points dove-tail very well with our emphasis on strengthening the central personnel system to make more formal and better use of the standards for promotion known as the Career Development Program (CPD).

Let me highlight our most important issues and recommendations. The core of the report consists of eight specific recommendations that focus on the need to redress America’s chronic under-investment in diplomacy and strengthen and expand the

State Department's professional development process. The first three recommendations focus on the resources and chronic under-investment issue and get at the long-term commitment to investing in professional education and training

This is all about the need for personnel. With Congressional support, the State Department has made serious progress in rectifying the problems we identified in our FAB report in 2008. However, that process is not complete. Several hundred positions are needed still for training alone. The Department still lacks an adequate number of positions for what the military calls a training and transfer reserve or "float." Although it has considerably expanded the positions for language training it has not been able to do the same thing for critical training in leadership and other key skills for the current foreign affairs environment.

The Department cannot move essential training to mandatory requirements until it has sufficient personnel to both staff essential work and put officers in training. Until an adequate training reserve is created, all the recommendations of ours, yours or the Secretary of State's are meaningless—they cannot be implemented without sufficient personnel and funding.

We are under no illusions that acquiring and maintaining such resources in the current budget climate will be extraordinarily difficult. Yet if we are not to have a second rate diplomacy incapable of meeting the nation's goals the fight must be waged. If there are not more people to train, then those we have will find that they must remain in critical jobs and they will not be available for training.

Secondly, and intertwined with the need for staff, the personnel system must take more responsibility for ensuring that officers actually take the training they need. You might think that the words "mandatory" and "required" are synonyms. Not in

the Department of State when it comes to training. “Mandatory” means, no kidding, you have to do it. “Required” means you should do it, but because we need you elsewhere you can get a waiver and skip it. And too much of the training officers need is “required,” which means it really isn’t.

This needs to change. The system already in place to do this, the Career Development Program (CPD), needs to be strengthened. That system, the CPD, lists essential wickets that officers must pass through for promotion. But it leaves these steps entirely to the officer. Nor is it yet clear that the personnel system will be able or willing to enforce its own rules. We think it should. For this to happen there must be a re-balancing of forces; enough bodies to train, stringent requirements for certain types of training, and a clear enough linkage between training and promotion to break a Foreign Service culture of resisting training; a culture the nation should no longer afford. We recognize that such change must come in tandem with the resources to implement them but come they should.

Our goal is an integration of resources and authorities to arrive at a situation where, in most cases, officers must take the training they require before getting to relevant jobs. I want to underline that this seemingly simple proposition--proper training before doing the job—is not happening now and will not under current congressional or Administration funding proposals.

The next two recommendations are the most far reaching in the study. The first deals with strengthening the personnel system. That may strike some as only bureaucratic tinkering. It is not. Our contention is that to have a properly trained staff some assignments need to be related to a long term view of essential training. For this to happen we want to break certain cherished traditions. One of these is the short term focus on assignments that considers only the immediate needs of the

Service and the preference of the officer. This does not adequately serve the national interest in a fully trained professional corps. Integrating assignments into how we produce experienced officers would significantly strengthen the Service. We recommend that the personnel system be reinforced with staff and authority to play a more central role in coupling assignments to long term professional development.

The following recommendation changes focus from training to education. Foreign Service Officers, like their military counterparts and other serious professions, need intellectual preparation for the much broader responsibilities that come with seniority. This is recognized in a notion of our military colleagues that they “train for certainty and educate for uncertainty.” The utility of education, not just training, is born out overwhelmingly by the experience of those who have had such opportunities from the now discontinued senior seminar, through the war colleges, to university training. We believe the goal must be to give every mid-level officer a year of professional education; not just a pastiche of short training courses jammed into already crowded professional lives. Education must involve a more serious commitment to reflection and thought. We recommend that, eventually, such a year of advanced study, relevant to their career tracks, become a firm condition for promotion to senior ranks.

Accordingly, one of our most far-reaching recommendations is to institute a full year of professional education for all middle grade officers. We know it cannot be done immediately. Therefore we recommend that there be a growing cascade of officers assigned to a year of professional education at war colleges and universities until we reach the point at which everyone can participate. Resources permitting, State might re-examine the utility of something like the old senior

seminar in the hope that State would someday carry its own weight in the area of professional education as FSI now does in training. Until such time as State can join the military in sharing the burden of educating government employees with international responsibility for the task of operating jointly with the so-called “whole of government” approach, we seek to expand the use of military and other outside sources to provide the broad education we believe essential for the senior diplomats of the future.

In this connection, I want to say that while we are generally and strongly supportive of the Administration’s budget and management of the Department of State, to hire only at attrition is a mistake. If we cannot hire 100 over attrition, then let it be 50, or 20 or even ten -- but do not lose the direction, and with it the goal of an effective diplomacy.

There are many additional recommendations that return to the focus on training that I will cover only briefly here. We recommend establishing a temporary corps of roving counselors, drawn extensively from among recently retired FSOs. This is to respond to problems that the mid-level gap has caused for mentoring. With two thirds of FSO having less than ten years in the Service there must be more attention to mentoring. The Director General is moving ahead with a similar program. We strongly endorse this.

Whatever changes we or others recommend, on-the-job training will remain a fact of life. But why should we go on assuming that every officer knows how best to motivate another generation or is God’s gift to instruction? We recommend conducting a study to examine best practices in on-the-job training. Such a study should then lead to institutionalizing best practices and training the mentors in how better to convey the fruits of their own experience to their subordinates.

We have also looked at better ways to train senior officers. Because the Foreign Service is small and the best senior officers are in such high demand for the most important jobs it is unrealistic to think that there can be extensive training once officers reach the most senior ranks. That is why we push for more and better professional education at the mid-grades with how we do on-the-job training and mentoring, which will always be part of our life as diplomats. Nevertheless, improvements are possible.

The experience of our large group of former chiefs of missions is that few country directorates have an adequate knowledge of how to most efficiently prepare a new ambassador to go to his post. Too much time is wasted while the new COM designs his or her own consultation. A short training course, very short and one which could be done by distance learning would ensure that bureau personnel are fully prepared to assist new Chiefs of Mission in identifying major policy issues and arranging for appropriate consultations.

And finally, since we are going to continue entrusting high office to those from outside the profession, why handicap them by throwing them into senior positions like assistant secretaries without a clue as to the bureaucratic or professional culture they must lead and function in? The habit of appointing outsiders to senior positions without training unfairly handicaps the appointees and wastes time while they learn how to lead effectively in the institution (the State Department) to which they are appointed. Accordingly, we recommend developing a familiarization course for new non-career officials, focusing on the structure and procedures of the Department, the interagency process, and Washington power relationships. We believe that non-career appointees should, whenever possible, complete such a

course before taking up their positions, if domestic, or abroad, before proceeding to the current course for new ambassadors.

Our report focused on the Foreign Service because that is where the competence of the Academy is strongest. However, we recognize that our partners in the business of diplomacy in AID, Commerce and Agriculture have similar needs for expanded training. We strongly support similar reviews of the need for training in these other agencies.

Sir, while our report is broad in scope I believe implementing our recommendations is essential to building a diplomatic service that can meet the needs of our nation in the coming years. I hope the committee will give all these recommendations due consideration.

Chairman Akaka, Senator Johnson, in closing, we recognize that we are in a difficult budgetary time. Nevertheless, let me leave you with one rather shocking figure and a final thought. The statistic is that right now, today, two-thirds of U.S. Foreign Service Officers have less than ten years of service. Let me repeat that: two-thirds of our diplomats have less than ten years of experience. We cannot afford to leave their “training” to mistakes made on the way to experience.

Not building our professional staff is akin to leaving maintenance of facilities undone. In the end, it costs more in time and in money to repair the damage. I hope that as cuts are examined, the Congress will recognize that diplomacy is an essential element of national security, and by far the cheapest part in lives and dollars. Yet to the extent that cuts must be made, let them be made in programs rather than in personnel. I assure you the results over time will be to our country’s benefit.

Thank you for your attention and I am ready to answer your questions.